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ABSTRACT

This paper reports feedback from 349 fifth through eighth graders who participated in Say It Straight (SIS), a school-based drug abuse prevention program which combines assertiveness training with role playing and guided imagery. The feedback presented concerns students' feelings about sending and receiving messages using the following communication styles: passive/placating, aggressive/blaming, super-reasonable, irrelevant, and assertive/leveling. For each style, a role-played conversation is given, followed by students' reports of feelings about playing that role. Student responses are presented by grade. Another aspect of SIS, positive peer pressure, is described as an intervention with a friend who is using drugs in which assertive/leveling communication is used to convince that friend to seek help. An example of a positive peer pressure role play is given and student attitudes toward the situation are reported. The results reported in this paper underscore the importance of empathy training for young people and indicate that assertive/leveling communication is the style most frequently associated with high self-esteem, repect from others, and greatest effectiveness. (NRB)

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Assertive/Leveling Communication and Empathy in Adolescent Drug Abuse Prevention

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ABSTRACT

Fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth graders role played situations in which they wanted to say "no" to alcohol/drugs or to talk to a friend who was "using." Youngsters described themselves as feeling good and having high self-respect/esteem only when they said "no" in an assertive/leveling way. Only youngsters toward whom an assertive/leveling "no" was addressed described themselves as surprised/shocked and respectful of the person who was saying "no." Finally, youngsters reported that the most effective way to convince a friend to quit "using" and/or get help was to express caring and friendship, and to touch the friend rather than being aggressive/blaming, irrelevant or super-reasonable.

This feedback from youngsters opens conceptual issues relevant to some assertiveness training and drug abuse prevention programs.

Assertive/Leveling Communication and Empathy in Adolescent Drug Abuse Prevention Training

Assertiveness training techniques are part of many school-based programs designed to prevent the onset of smoking or alcohol/drug abuse among adolescents (Botvin, & Eng, 1982; Englander-Golden, Elconin, & Miller, in press; Evans, Rozelle, Maxwell et al., 1981; Evans, Rozelle, Mittelmark, et al., 1978; Horan & Williams, 1982; Hurd et al., 1980; McAlister, Perry, Killen, Slinkard, & Maccoby, 1980; McAlister, Perry, & Maccoby, 1979; Perry, Killen, & Slinkard, 1980). Satir's clinical observations suggest that youngsters prefer strategies which enhance their self-esteem and elicit respect from their peers. Since youngsters may find themselves saying "yes" when their feelings tell them to say "no", it is important to allow them to explore such conflicts. This opportunity is provided in an alcohol/drug abuse prevention training program called SAY IT STRAIGHT (SIS) (Englander-Golden et al., in press; Englander-Golden, Elconin, & Miller, 1985). Through role playing and guided imagery youngsters learn to recognize explicitly the ways they respond in different interactions, as well as the feelings which accompany these responses. They explore feelings which emerge when they use various communication styles to role play saying "yes", saying "no", saying "I have quit", and talking

to a friend about whose behavior they are concerned. Finally, they receive feedback from their peers concerning their effectiveness. Thus, saying "no" to an offer of drugs could be role-played in the following ways: "I don't want it, if I get caught my parents will kill me," or "No. I'm hungry. Let's go eat," or "That's stupid, you jerk!" Intervention with a friend might be explored as: "This is killing you. Don't be stupid," "Don't you have anything better to do. If I had your troubles I'd do it too," or "We are friends. I care about you and it scares me to see what you are doing," or "I'll stick by you,let's go to the counselor." Although the focus of SIS training is drug abuse prevention, youngsters are allowed to explore other situations which are salient to them. Satir's body sculpting techniques (Satir, 1972) were used to maximize the experience and expression of feelings associated with the different communication styles.

Rather than telling youngters the most effective means of communicating, SIS training gives them the opportunity to discover this for themselves in their own interactions. The success of this approach is reflected in the significantly lower frequency of alcohol/drug related school suspensions incurred during the 1983-84 school year by the 1064 6th-9th graders who have been trained since September of 1982 as compared to the 1295 remaining 6th-9th graders in the same city who did not receive this training.

The results reported in this paper are based on feedback from 5th-8th graders who participated in SIS training in 1983-84. This

feedback, collected on the last day of training, concerned how it felt to be the sender and receiver of the following communication styles: passive/placating (we don't stand up for ourselves, we feel we are nothing without the other person's approval); aggressive/blaming (we push others around, we ridicule, threaten or blame); super-reasonable (we lecture without ever expressing our feelings); irrelevant (we discount curselves by not sticking to the issue, we distract or change the subject), and assertive/leveling (we respect our rights and the rights of others, we honestly express our thoughts and feelings rather than only telling others what we think they feel). The hybrid terminology used to define these communication styles reflects the pooling of concepts from assertiveness training (Lange & Jakubowski, 1978) and Satir's communication work (Satir, 1972; Satir, 1976).

In SIS training, the expression "positive peer pressure" describes an intervention with a friend in which assertive/leveling communication is used to express friendship, concern, support and a gentle yet firm request that the friend seek help. This positive use of peer pressure gives youngsters the opportunity to develop empathy, to discover its effects, and to compare such effects with those of blaming, lecturing, or never taking the risk of addressing the problem. By assuming both the role of the intervener and the friend with the problem, youngsters develop out of their own experience an understanding of the other person's perspective. These role plays also provide youngsters with the opportunity to

respond to each other affectively. The development of empathy is most directly addressed within positive peer pressure role plays, and is reinforced through further exploration and dialogues in other role plays. In all role plays youngsters are given the opportunity to exchange roles, so that they experience and express feelings from different vantage points. Thus, youngsters develop the capacities to identify another's emotional state, to assume the other's perspective and to respond affectively, the three components Feshback conceptualized as making up the experience of empathy (Feshbach, 1983).

Results reported here underscore the importance of empathy training for young people and indicate that assertive/leveling communication is the style most frequently associated with high self esteem, respect from others, and greatest effectiveness. These results are congruent with Satir's communication work (Satir, 1972; Satir, 1976), as well as the Johnson Institute's highly successful model of intervention with chemically dependent people (Johnson, 1980). Within this model, significant others (family members, employers, friends, etc.) of the chemically dependent person express their deep concern in a nonjudgmental fashion, sticking to specific incidents with the goal of getting the person to treatment.

ELICITING FEEDBACK

During the last session of SIS training youngsters were asked how they felt when they were senders or receivers of

passive/placating, aggressive/blaming, irrelevant, super-reasonable and assertive/leveling communication. They were then asked what was most effective in talking to a friend about whose behavior they were concerned. This feedback was collected from 5 groups of 8th graders (N=65), 7 groups of 7th graders (N=118), 6 groups of 6th graders (N=95) and 3 groups of 5th graders (N=71). When students used different labels to describe similar feelings, such as "weak" and "not so strong", both were recorded. However, each descriptive label was recorded only once, regardless of how many students endorsed it in a particular group.

Passive/Placating Communication

Mary: Want to smoke a joint after school?

Susan: No, we might get caught.

Mary: Don't worry. I know a place, no one will see us.

Susan: If my parents find out, they'll kill me.

Mary: Don't be a baby! I do it all the time and I haven't been caught.

Susan: Oh, all right.

The above is an illustration of role plays developed by youngsters in which their passive/placating attempt to say "no" became increasingly difficult or failed completely.

When processing the feelings evoked by such role plays, 8th graders who played the passive/placating role reported the following feelings (if a feeling was mentioned in more than one group, it is indicated in parentheses): weak(2), angry(2),

helpless, powerless, wimpy, dumb, like an inept dolt, terrible, bad, small, cold, inferior, low, little competence, low self esteem, guilty, frustrated, negative, pressured, withdrawn, wish they'd quit. Eighth grade recipients of passive/placating communication reported feeling: powerful(2), guilty(2), superior(2), no respect for other(2), tough, agressive, over-confident, angry, other is a pushover, get your way, uncomfortable, happy, strong, may feel scared.

In similar role plays, 7th graders who were passive/placating felt: low self respect/esteem(6), embarrassed(4), terrible(2), angry at self(2), uncomfortable(2), guilty(2), nervous(2), weak, stomach tight, stupid, like an idiot, crummy, worthless, no gcod, not certain, no rights, manipulated, down, low, can't do anything right, bad. Seventh grade recipients of such communication felt: Powerful(6), strong(2), no respect(2), guilty(2), other is pushover(2), happy, good, successful, guilty later, disappointed, bad later, incontrol of other, bossy, commanding, boss the other, confident, liked, greatest person, bad, cool dude, number one man.

Sixth graders who were passive/placating felt: sad(3), angry(2), upset(2), stupid(2), not good(2), like a pushover(2), unwanted(2), bad(2), terrible, horrible, mad, pressured, turned down, give up, like a loser, retarded, idiotic, like crying, weak, low, down, embarrassed, strange, weird, sick, angry at self, butterflies. Sixth grade recipients of such communication felt: guilty(5), powerful(3), no respect(2), great(2), relieved, like

taking advantage, dissappointed, happy, good, excited, bad, tough, big, sad later, angry, mad, I've got you pinned, strong.

Fifth graders who played passive/placating roles felt: bad, horrible, sick, uncomfortable, down in the dumps, low, not so strong, like a pushover, slavelike, underpower, stupid, embarrassed, weird, ridiculous, scared, nervous, worried, unsure, confused, lost, sad, bored. Fifth grade receivers of such communication felt: powerful(2), strong, good, happy, mad, aggressive, furious, impressed, control, advantage, confident, sure, other is a pushover, bored, worried, depressed.

Aggressive/Blaming Communication

Sam: Here, Bart, take one of these. The team is counting on you tonight.

Bart: What are you trying to do, mess me up?

Sam: What's the matter, are you chicken?

Bart: Watch who you're calling chicken, junkie!

Sam: You couldn't complete a pass to save your life...

This illustrates an aggressive/blaming role play.

Eighth graders who responded in an aggressive/blaming way reported the following feelings: guilty(4), angry(3), scared(2), powerful, strong, competent, mean, fun, anxious, no respect, other is an ant, other is a jerk, other is a pushover, bad, wound up, want other to know I have control, feel strong-look dumb. The 8th graders who received such communication felt: scared(4), angry(4), hurt(2), put down, weak, less self respect, small, nervous.

Seventh graders who responded in an aggressive/blaming manner felt: powerful(5), in control(3), good(2), guilty(2), angry(2), strong(2), furious, happy, proud, brave, mean, upset, frustrated, confused, feel bad later, over-rated, less powerful, tough, undefeated, bad, on top, mad, forceful, overpowering. Seventh graders who received such communications felt: scared(5), weak(3), embarrassed(2), like fighting(2), low(2), mad(2), hurt(2), uncertain, confused, want to run away, meek, humble, angry, stupid, ignorant, ignoble, backed down, aggressive, underpower, taken aback, sad, unliked, pushed, on bottom, bad, unrespected, nervous, afraid, frightened.

Sixth graders who responded in an aggressive/blaming way felt: guilty(4), mad(3), angry(3), powerful(3), tough(2), good(2), looking for a fight(2), macho, in control, mean, awesome, cool, brave, nervous, bad afterward, fun, terrible, like crying, weird, bad, strong. Sixth graders who received such communication felt: scared(3), fear(2), mad(2), angry(2), upset(2), aggressive(2), superior, want revenge, worried, terrible, embarrassed, dumb, puny, sad, fidgety, like a pushover, guilty, surprised, want to back off, like punching, feisty.

Fifth graders who responded in an aggressive/blaming way felt: powerful(3), strong(2), mad(2), stupid, dumb, super person, aggressive, good, uplifted, awesome, bad later, worried, scared inside-mean outside. Fifth graders who received such communication felt: scared(3), mad(3), surprised(2), weak(2), depressed, down,

like crying, embarrassed, put down, unimportant, guilty, hurt, want revenge, want to fight back, give in, terrified.

Irrelevant Communication

Margaret: Tom, come to my house and we'll sneak my parents' beer.

Tom: Did you see that new show last night?

Margaret: Yes. Are you going to come over?

Tom: Man, that science test was rough!

Margaret: Answer me! Are you coming over or not?

Tom: Let's go get a coke.

Margaret: Are you deaf or just stupid? Forget it!

This is an illustration of an irrelevant role play.

Eighth graders who responded in this way felt: pressured(2), scared(2), anxious, nervous, stupid, foolish, ridiculous, frustrated, mad, ignored, scattered, uncomfortable, irrelevant, upset, keep looking for other reasons. Eighth grade recipients of irrelevant communication felt: angry(4), frustrated(3), mad(2), irritated, disgusted, like killing, give up, forget it.

Seventh graders who responded in an irrelevant way felt: pressured(5), nervous(3), scared(3), silly(2), weird(2), not confident, uncertain, confused, lost, bad, like a loser, guilty, dumb, irrelevant, want to leave, excited, sweat a lot, worried, down. Seventh grade receivers of such communication felt: mad(6), frustrated(6), angry(2), perturbed, upset, aggravated, powerful, laughter, forget it, furious.

Sixth graders who responded in an irrelevant manner felt:

pressured(3), stupid(2), crazy(2), weird, like a dope, like a jerk, like a fool, uncomfortable, confused, different, rude, mad, fear, nervous, bad, put down, powerful and not powerful, innocent. Sixth grade recipients of irrelevant communication felt: mad(4), frustrated(4), weird(2), aggressive(2), crazy, other is dumb, no respect, bored, upset, worried, confused, defeated, stupid, might want to push.

Fifth graders who responded in an irrelevant way felt: dumb(2), ignorant, strange, weird, out of place, unsure, scared, nervous, lonely, left out, depressed. Fifth graders who received such communication felt: angry(2), mad, furious, aggressive, pushy, forget them, powerful, confident, anxious, confused, bored, depressed.

Super-Reasonable Communication

George: Want to get high?

Ralph: No, thanks. Did you know smoking causes cancer in laboratory rats?

George: Who cares. I'm not a rat.

Ralph: That could seriously injure your health, and the penalties if you get caught are very severe. You shoudn't.....

George: What are you, the encyclopedia? Get lost!

This role play illustrates super-reasonable communication.

Eighth graders who responded in this way felt: nothing(2), no feeling, frozen, rigid, can't breathe, stuffy, snotty, detached, dumb, awful inside, scared, powerful but not really, not getting

the point across, it wasn't me-I am over there. Eighth graders receiving such communication felt: angry(3), mad(3), put down, rejected, dumb, stupid, idiotic, sad, other is smarter than I, confused, like a worm, guilty, impatient, bored, other is a jerk.

Seventh graders who responded in a super-reasonable manner felt: smart(4), superior(2), know-it-all, whiz kid, snobby, think down on others, better, super-reasonable, one big ego trip, cold, numb, no feelings, nervous, not caring, mad, pressured, sophisticated, good, intelligent. Seventh grade recipients of such communication felt: dumb(4), stupid(3), mad(3), frustrated(3), aggressive, bad, low, nervous, backed into a corner, small, ignore other, like I don't want to.

Sixth graders who responded in a super-reasonable way felt: smart(2), know-it-all(2), like a teacher, logical, have reason, strong, computer mind, feel right, positive, not very good, stupid, numb, power, great. Sixth graders who received super-reasonable communication felt: dumb(3), mad(2), angry, aggressive, like fighting, other is stupid, ignore them, don't listen, like a loser, embarrassed, low, want to leave, bored.

Fifth graders who responded in a super-reasonable way felt: smart(2), logical, the authority, bigshot, not many feelings, ridiculous, silly, stupid, like a jerk, depressed. Fifth grade recipients of such communication felt: frustrated(3), aggravated, angry, mad, furious, like slapping other, stupid, ignorant, dumb, bored, surprised, want to leave.

Assertive/Leveling Communication

Louise: Janet, come drink this with me.

Janet: No, I don't want it.

Louise: Please, you're my best friend. I've done lots of things for you.

Janet: I don't want it (and walks away).

This is an example of an assertive/leveling role play.

Eighth graders who responded in this manner felt: self-respect/esteem(4), good(3), respect other(2), direct,calm, honest, fun, relieved, in command, accomplishment, expressing feelings, easiest way to say "no". Eighth graders who received such communication felt: surprised(3), shocked(2), respect other(2), mad, nonviolent, may feel low, may get mad, mad for a while, guilty, accepting, let down.

Seventh graders who responded in an assertive/leveling manner felt: high self esteem/respect(5), good(4), strong(2), in control of self(2), confident(2), relieved(2), better, angry, aggressive, great, bad, felt better when I left, awesome, neat, respect other, helping self and other, happy, powerful. Seventh graders who received such communication felt: respect the other(4), bad(3), mad(2), angry, furious, surprised, shocked, mad at first, bad about asking, guilty, sorry, lonely, nervous, other is a chicken, may feel forceful, more comfortable, good, rejected.

Sixth graders who responded in an assertive/leveling way felt: good(4), great(3), high self-respect(3), powerful(2), relieved(2),

awesome(2), lighter than air, active, confident, positive, comfortable, honest, low, guilty, real good, gnarly, cool, tubular, strong. Sixth grade recipients of such communication felt: mad(2) angry(2), respect(2), put down(2), sad(2), confused(2), good, glad, they have courage, shocked, weird, low, hurt, might not want to be friendly, weak, may be upset, kind of ticked off, terrible, may feel set up.

Fifth graders who responded in an assertive/leveling way felt: great(3), good(2), confident(2), awesome, powerful, strong, high self-esteem, grown up, the boss, stand your ground, pretty good, bad, dumb. Fifth graders who received such communication felt: mad(3), angry, relieved, happy, confused, bad, cruddy, respect, stupid, embarrassed, ashamed, O.K., sad, alone, depressed, down, dusted, won't stay mad.

Positive Peer Pressure

Bret: Hi, Bill. We want to talk to you.

Mike: We're worried about your drinking.

Bill: Leave me alone. It's none of your business.

Bret: You keep falling asleep in class and you threw up yesterday.

Mike: We're your friends and we want to help.

Bill: I'm fine. I'll see you later.

Bret: Wait. Come see the counselor. We'll stick by you.
(gently takes Bill's arm)

Bill: O.K.

This is an illustration of a positive peer pressure role play. Often, a role play which is initially an assertive/leveling "no" to an offer of alcohol or other drugs becomes a positive peer pressure role play. For example, in the previous illustration on assertive/leveling communication, Janet's response might have been "I don't want it and it scares me to see what you are doing. You're my best friend."

The most effective ways named by 8th graders to intervene with a friend about whose behavior they were concerned (positive peer pressure) were: showing caring(4), touch(3), concern(2), saying you'll stick with them(2), straight talk, being nonjudgmental, persistence, friendly force, eye contact, logical reasons, being assertive/leveling, friendship, being at same level. The least effective ways to talk to a friend mentioned by the 8th graders were: blaming(3), yelling(3), putting them down, lectures, being super-reasonable, anger, being irrelevant, name calling, saying "I heard..", talking about self, forcing, not giving a choice, giving logical reasons, saying "you've got a problem".

The most effective ways of talking to a friend mentioned by the 7th graders were: friendship(6), touch(5), express caring(4), concern(3), be at eye level(2), trusting, respect, low voice, trying to find out what the problem is, not denying the problem, offering to go with them, expressing feelings, being reasonable about alternatives, empathy, sincerity. The least effective ways

mentioned by the 7th graders were: name calling(5), forcing(3), not showing concern, hard touch, towering over, standing high above, not enough friends. making them feel dumb, putting them down, being aggressive, ignoring, lecturing, being irrelevant, ridiculing, blaming, saying that others know.

The most effective ways of talking to a friend mentioned by 6th graders were: express caring/concern(5), touch(3), saying you'll stick with them(3), friendship(2), stating facts, expressing feelings, being helpful, being assertive, express worry, want them to feel better. The least effective ways mentioned by the 6th graders were: blaming(4), yelling(2), ridicule(2), being super-reasonable, lecturing, hitting, pushing, arguing, guilting, anger, aggression, trying to control, saying "go get help".

The most effective ways of talking to a friend mentioned by 5th graders were: show caring(2), touch(2), respect(2), friendship(2), show concern, be on eye level, honesty, trusting feelings, being nice, being close, caring voice. The least effective ways mentioned by 5th graders were: blaming(2), ordering, jerking, ridiculing, forcing, backing off, being above them, telling on them, threatening, screaming, not expressing feelings, saying "you need...".

Concluding Remarks

The results reported here open up conceptual issues relevant to assertveness training and alcohol/drug abuse prevention

programs. Although the definition of assertiveness (Lange & Jakubowski, 1978) is comparable to Satir's leveling (Satir, 1972; Satir, 1976), in practice there are at least two major differences. First, as has been recognized, some assertiveness trainers advocate the use of countermanipulations as part of being assertive (Lange & Jakubowski, 1978). This is never the case with leveling. Second, in assertiveness training people are often taught to express what they think the other person feels rather than revealing their own feelings, whereas the hallmark of leveling is the expression of one's own feelings (Satir, 1976). As assertiveness is meant to convey a feeling of respect for the other person, as well as for oneself, perhaps the best way to discover whether a communication is assertive or countermanipulative is to discover its effect on the sender and receiver. The results reported here indicate that changing the subject, which is taught as an assertive strategy in some adolescent substance abuse prevention programs (Resnick, 1983; National Institute on Drug Abuse, 1983) elicited overwhelmingly angry and frustrated feelings in the receiver and feelings of being pressured, scared and stupid in the sender. Although in the previous example of irrelevant communication the subject may have been changed more times than is taught in adolescent substance abuse prevention programs, it is clear that caution must be exercised in training youngsters to respond in this manner. A similar note of caution is relevant when training youngsters in

the strategy of giving excuses (Fairfax County School Board Department of Student Services and Special Education, 1983). This strategy, which is labled passive/placating in SIS training, results in feelings of powerlessness and low self-esteem in the sender. In our experience with over 1500 youngsters, saying "no" in this manner was almost invariably followed by further pressure. The youngster who originally said "no" almost always finished by saying "yes". In contrast, youngsters who were assertive/leveling were not only effective in refusing, they also reported feeling good and feeling high self-respect. Recipients, although they reported feeling anger, also felt respect for the sender and an understanding that the anger might be short-lived. Indeed, eighth graders mentioned feelings of acceptance and non-violence. The possibility of underlying developmental changes in moral reasoning (Rest, 1973; Kohlberg, 1964) and empathy (Hoffman, 1975) are suggested by self reports of guilt and positive peer pressure behaviors. Sixth through eighth grade pushers reported feeling guilty when receiving a passive/placating response. Fifth graders did not. Furthermore, although all youngsters discovered they were most effective in convincing a friend to seek help when they showed caring and friendship and used touch, fifth graders had much more difficulty in producing such behaviors. Although most youngsters required some verbal coaching to eliminate blaming, lecturing and irrelevancy, these were the only youngsters who consistently required trainer modeling of positive peer pressure.

Their main concern was with the illegality of substance use and the consequent punishment. In one instance in which the trainer did not model, the intervention was not effective. When asked why he did not respond to the request to seek help, the fifth grader answered "I did not feel cared for." Thus, even though fifth graders did not spontaneously produce the behaviors which are defined as positive peer pressure, their responses were the same as the older students' when they were the objects of such interventions. This indicates that they understood the meaning of such behaviors even though these were not yet part of their spontaneous repertoire. The effectiveness of training youngsters in straightforward communication and empathy is reflected in the significantly lower incidence of "users" among trained youngsters (Englander-Golden et al., in press). It is further demonstrated by reports that self-referrals increase not only among trained yougsters, but also among their siblings (S. Barker, personal communication, 1984).

This study has obvious limitations inasmuch as each response was recorded only once per group. However, the information obtained from the youngsters is of great importance to the conceptual framework of prevention programs for adolescents, as well as for empathy training programs. In future research the frequency of occurrence of responses for all youngsters will have to be recorded. Such data will reveal more accurately the prevalence of responses reported in this paper as a function of communication.

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